Policy & Practice

FDA Delays Hydroquinone Action

The Food and Drug Administration says over-the-counter products containing hydroquinone will be allowed to stay on the market until July 30, 2009. The move was buried in the agency's Unified Agenda for 2008, a twice-yearly update on regulatory actions and is available at www.regulations.gov or www.fda.gov. Currently, hydroquinone, an ingredient in both prescription and over-the-counter skin lightening creams, is generally recognized as safe and effective. But the FDA proposed in August 2006 to remove that designation, saying that studies had found the ingredient to be carcinogenic. In that proposed rule, the FDA said that over-the-counter products containing 2% hydroquinone would have to be off the market by January 2008. An agency spokeswoman confirmed that the withdrawal date has now been extended, but would not comment any further.

Sunscreens Ineffective, Group Claims

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) says that 85% of sunscreens either offer inadequate protection from ultraviolet rays or contain ingredients that are hazardous or have not been tested for safety. This is the second year that the Washington-based nonprofit organization has rated sunscreen safety and effectiveness. The EWG based its ratings on 400 peer-reviewed studies of the 17 ingredients approved for use in products sold in the United States. Among top-selling sunscreens, none of the 41 Coppertone products and only 1 of 103 Neutrogena and Banana Boat products met the EWG's criteria, said the group, which has been lobbying the FDA to finalize sunscreen safety standards. A spokeswoman for Coppertone maker Schering-Plough Corp. said that its products are "photostable, provide UVA/UVB protection, and are routinely evaluated for safety and efficacy by independent dermatologists and scientists." The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) issued a statement that it also was awaiting the FDA's final rule, but that dermatologists still recommend the use of broad-spectrum sunscreen products. "Sunscreen is an important tool in the fight against skin cancer," said Dr. C. William Hanke, AAD president. The AAD did not directly address the EWG's findings.

Slump Hasn't Hit Cosmetic Derm

The American Society for Dermatologic Surgery says that a new survey of 562 members has found that "63% are maintaining a consistent volume of bookings for existing patients seeking cosmetic-related procedures compared to 6 months ago." Almost a quarter of the membership reported an increase in appointments with established patients, and about a third said there had been a 30% increase in bookings by new patients. About half the respondents said the use of fillers and lasers had stayed steady and that they expected it to hold over the next 6 months. Slightly more members—about 40%—said the use of injectable toxins was up from 6 months ago. Finally, about half said that patients were more concerned about the cost of the procedures; 44% said that patients were stretching the time between visits.

CMS Issues PQRI Payments

Physicians who successfully reported quality measures to Medicare in 2007 as part of the Physician Quality Reporting Initiative should be receiving their bonus payments this month Officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services recently announced that they had paid out more than $36 million in bonuses to physicians and other health professionals as part of the PQRI. Of the approximately 109,000 health professionals who reported data on Medicare services provided during July-December 2007, more than 56,700 met the reporting requirements and will be receiving bonus checks. The average bonus paid to an individual provider was more than $600, and the average bonus for a physician group practice was more than $4,700. The largest payment to a physician group practice was more than $205,700, according to the CMS. "These payments to physicians for participating in the PQRI are a first step toward improving how Medicare pays for health care services," Kerry Weems, acting administrator, said in a statement. Under the PQRI, physicians could earn bonus payments of up to 1.5% of their total allowed Medicare charges by successfully reporting quality data for Medicare services provided from July to December 2007. In addition to the bonus payments, physicians and other health professionals can start accessing confidential feedback reports on their performance. To access the feedback reports, providers must register with the Individuals Authorized Access to CMS Computer Services-Provider Community (IACS-PC). More information on the program is available at www.cms.hhs.gov/pqri.

—Alicia Ault